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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

IV. Common Sense. Saturday, February 5, 1737. N° 1.

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IV.

COMMON SENSE*.

SATURDAY, February 5, 1737.

N^o I.

Rarus enim ferme sensus communis—Juv.
Nothing so rare as common sense.

A PREFACE is, by long custom, become so necessary a part of a book, that should an author now omit that previous ceremony, he would be accused of presumption, and be supposed to imagine that his performance was above wanting any recommendation. By a preface, an author presents himself to the public, and begs their friendship and protection; if he does it gracefully and genteelly, he is well received, like many a fine gentleman upon the strength of his first address. Besides, were it not for the modest encomiums, which authors generally bestow upon themselves in their prefaces, their works would often die unpraised, and sometimes unread.

A weekly writer, I know, is not of a rank to pretend to a preface; but an humble introduction is expected from him. He must make his bow to the public at his first appearance, let them a little into his design, and give them a sample of what they are to expect from him afterwards.

In this case, it may be equally unhappy for him, to give himself out, like Æsop's fellow-slaves, for one that can do every thing, or like Æsop, for one that can do nothing; for, if he speaks too assumingly, the world will revolt against him, and if too modestly, be apt to take him at his word.

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* This paper, in which several persons of eminence were concerned, was partly political and on the side of opposition, but mostly moral, and calculated for the improvement of manners and taste. Lord Lyttleton was one of the writers, and the papers which fell from his pen, have been inserted in the collection of his works.

Those, which are here given, sufficiently shew, by the original turn and admirable management of irony discernible in them, the masterly hand from which they came. Our authority, however, for producing them as lord Chesterfield's, is that of one of his particular friends, to whom his lordship gave the list, which we have followed.

These considerations determined me to make this first paper serve as an introduction to my future labours, though I am sensible that a weekly author is in a very different situation from an author in the lump.—If a wholesale dealer can, by an insinuating preface, prevail with people to buy the whole piece, his business is done, and it is too late for the deluded purchaser to repent, be the goods ever so flimsy; but a weekly retailer is constantly bound to his good behaviour. He, like some others, holds both his honors and profits only *durante bene placito*; and whatever may be the success of his first endeavours, as soon as he flags in his painful hebdomadal course, he is rigorously struck off at once from his two-penny establishment.

Another difficulty, that occurred to me, was the present great number of my weekly brethren, with whom all people, except the stationers and the Stamp-office, think themselves already over-stocked; but this difficulty upon farther consideration lessened.

As for the London Journal, it cannot possibly interfere with me, as appears from the very title of my paper; moreover I was informed, that paper of the same size and goodness as the London Journal, being to be had much cheaper unprinted and unstamped, and yet as useful to all intents and purposes, was now universally preferred.

Fog's Journal, by a natural progression from Mist to Fog, is now condensed into a cloud, and only used by way of wet brown paper, in case of falls and contusions.

The Craftsman was the only rival that gave me any concern; that being the only one, I thought there was world enough for us both, and persuaded myself that, wiser than Cæsar and Pompey, we should content ourselves with dividing it between us; besides that, I never observed Mr. D'Anvers to be an enemy to common sense.

Being a man of great learning, I have, in chusing the name of my paper, had before my eyes that excellent precept of Horace to authors, to begin modestly, and not to promise more than they are able to perform, and keep up to the last.—I have therefore only entitled it Common Sense, which is all I pretend to myself, and no more than what, I dare say, the humblest of my readers pretends to likewise.

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But, as a farther encouragement and invitation to the public to try me, I declare, that though I only promise them common sense, yet if I have any wit they shall have it into the bargain. Wherefore I desire my customers to look upon this weekly expence as a two-penny ticket in a lottery: it may possibly come up wit, and if a blank, at worst, common sense.

But, as modesty is the best recommendation to great minds, on the other side it is apt to prejudice little ones, who mistake it for ignorance, or guilt; therefore, that I may not suffer by it with the latter, I must repeat a known observation, that common sense is no such common thing. I could give many instances of this truth, if I would, but decline it at present, and chuse to refer my readers to their several friends and acquaintance.

Should I here be asked then what I mean by common sense, if it is so uncommon a thing, I confess I should be at a loss to know how to define it. I take common sense, like common honesty, rather to be called common, because it should be so, than because it is so. It is rather that rule, by which men judge of other people's actions, than direct their own; the plain result of right reason admitted by all, and practised by few.

An ingenious dramatic author has considered common sense as so extraordinary a thing, that he has lately, with great wit and humor, not only personified it, but dignified it too with the title of a queen. Though I am not sure that had I been to personify common sense, I should have borrowed my figure from that sex, yet as he has added the regal dignity, which by the law of the land removes all defects, I wave any objection.—The fair sex in general, queens excepted, are infinitely above plain downright common sense; sprightly fancy and shining irregularities are their favourites, in which despairing to satisfy, though desirous to please, them, I have, in order to be of some use to them, stipulated with my stationer, that my paper shall be of the properest sort for pinning up of their hair. As the new French fashion is very favourable to me in this particular, I flatter myself, they will not disdain to have some common sense about their heads at so easy a rate.

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Should I ever, as possibly I often may, be extremely dull, I will not, as some of my predecessors have done, pretend that it was by design, for I protest that I do not intend it; but in that case, I claim my share in the present general indulgence to dulness, of being thought the wiser for it, and hope to meet with sympathetic nods of approbation from the most solid of my readers. Moreover, I shall go on the longer and the safer for it, dulness being the ballast of the mind, that fits it for a long voyage, keeps it steady, and secures it from the gusts of fancy and imagination.

I cannot help thinking how very advantageous it may be to a great many people to purchase my paper, were it only for the sake of the title.—Have you read common sense? Have you got common sense? are questions which one should be very sorry not to be able to answer in the affirmative; and yet, in order to be able to do it with truth, a precaution of this kind may possibly not be unnecessary, at least it can do no hurt.

As to the design of my paper, it is to take in all subjects whatsoever, and try them by the standard of common sense. I shall erect a kind of tribunal, for the *criminalis sensus communis*, or the pleas of common sense. But the method of proceeding must be different from that of other courts, or it would be contrary to the meaning and institution of this. The cause of common sense shall be pleaded in common sense. Let not the guilty hope to escape, or the innocent fear being puzzled, delayed, ruined or condemned.

It would be endless for me to enumerate the various branches of the jurisdiction of this court, since every thing, more or less, falls under its cognizance. The possession or the want of common sense appears proportionably in the lowest, as well as in the highest, transactions, and a king and a cobbler, without it, will equally bungle in their respective callings. The *quicquid agunt homines* (actions of men) is my province; and *homines* comprehends, not only all men, but all women too, that is, as far as they are to be comprehended. The conduct of the fair sex will therefore come under my consideration; but with this indulgence, which is due to them, that, in trying their actions by the straight rule of common sense, I shall make proper allowances for those pretty obliquities and
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deviations from it, which great vivacity, lively passions, and conscious beauty, frequently occasion, and in some measure justify.

The fine gentlemen cannot hope to escape trial, were it only as accessaries to their fair principals. I am aware, that they will cavil at the jurisdiction of the court, and will alledge, if they know how, that they are brought *coram non judice* (before an incompetent judge). I acknowledge too, that they have a presumptive kind of exemption from inquiries and prosecutions of this nature; but as this connivance, if too long indulged, might grow into a right, I must insist upon their appearing sometimes in court, where they shall meet with all the lenity, that is due to their birth and education.

But let all authors from right honorable, or right reverend, down to the humblest inhabitant in Grub-street, respect and tremble at the jurisdiction of the court. With them I disclaim all lenity, as they are generally the most daring and boldest offenders. I shall try them by my rule, as the tyrant Procrustes tried his subjects by his bed, and will, without mercy, stretch out those that fall short of it, and cut off from those who go beyond it.

I am sensible that common sense has lately met with very great discouragement in the noble science of politics; our chief professors having thought themselves much above those obvious rules that had been followed by our ancestors, and that lay open to vulgar understandings; they have weighed the interests of Europe in nicer scales, and settled them in so delicate a balance, that the least blast affects it. For my part, I shall endeavour to bring them back to the old solid English standard of common sense; but if by that means any gentlemen, who distinguish themselves in that sublime sphere, should be at a loss for business, and appear totally unqualified for it, I hope they will not lay their misfortunes to my charge, since it is none of my fault, if their interests and those of common sense happen to be incompatible.

If, in domestic affairs too, I should find that common sense has been neglected, I shall take the liberty to assert its rights, and represent the justice, as well as the expediency, of restoring it to its former credit and dignity. Our constitution is founded upon common sense
itself,

itself, and every deviation from one is a violation of the other. The several degrees and kinds of power, wisely allotted to the several constituent parts of our legislature, can only be altered by those, who have no more common sense than common honesty. Such offenders shall be proceeded against as guilty of high-treason, and suffer the severest punishment.

I foresee all the difficulties I am to struggle with, in the course of this undertaking; and see the improbability, if not the impossibility, that common sense should singly, by its own weight and merit, make its way into the world, and retrieve its lost empire. But as many valuable things in themselves have owed their reception and establishment, not to their own intrinsic worth, but to some lucky hit, or favourable concurrence of circumstances, so some such accident in my favour is what I more rely upon than the merit of my paper, should it have any. Fashion, which prevails nobody knows how, can introduce what reason would in vain recommend; and as, by the circulation of fashions, the old ones revive after a certain interval, the fashion of common sense seems to have been laid aside long enough to have a fair chance now for revival.

If therefore any fine woman, in good humour on a Saturday morning, would be pleased to drop a word in my favour, and say, "It is a good comical paper;" or any man of quality, at the head of taste, be so kind as to say, "It is not a bad thing;" I should become the fashion, and be universally bought up at least: and as for being read or not, it is other people's business, not mine.

As I am scrupulous even to delicacy in all my engagements, I must premise that, in intitling my paper Common Sense, I only mean the first half-sheet, or it may be a column of the next; the rest of the paper, which will contain the events foreign and domestic, I am very far from promising shall have any relation at all to common sense. But, as the chief profits of a weekly writer arise from thence, the world, which at least reasons very justly upon that subject, would, I am sure, think that I wanted common sense myself, if I neglected them.

Upon the whole, my intention is to rebuke vice, correct errors, reform abuses, and shame folly and prejudice, without regard to any thing but common sense; which,

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as it implies common decency too, I shall confine myself to things, and not attack persons; it being my desire to improve or amuse every body, without shocking any body.

I do not think it necessary, at least yet, to give the public any information as to my person; let my paper stand upon its own legs. My present resolution is to keep my name concealed, unless my success should some day or other tempt my vanity to discover it. All I will say at present is, that I never appeared in print before; and if I should not meet with some encouragement now, I shall withdraw myself to my former retirements, and there indulge those oddnesses that compose my character; the description of which, if I go on, may some time or other entertain my readers.

V.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, February 19, 1737. N^o 3.

BERNIER informs us of a very extraordinary custom, which prevails to this day in the empire of the Mogul. His imperial majesty is annually weighed upon his birth-day, and if it appears that, since his former weighing, he has made any considerable acquisition of flesh, it is matter of public rejoicings throughout his whole dominions. Upon that great day too, his subjects are obliged to make him presents, which seldom amount to less than thirty millions.

This seems to be a custom which, like many customs in other countries, is merely observed for antiquity or form-sake; but the original purpose for which it was at first wisely established, is either neglected or quite forgotten: or it is impossible to imagine, that his Mogul majesty's good and loyal subjects should find such matter of joy in the literal increase of their sovereign's materiality, which must of course render him less qualified for the functions and duties of his government;

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